

A Second Glance

“The Harlem Dancer” By: Claude McKay

Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes
 And watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway;
 Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes
 Blown by black players upon a picnic day.
 She sang and danced on gracefully and calm, 5
 The light gauze hanging loose about her form;
 To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm
 Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.
 Upon her swarthy neck black shiny curls
 Luxuriant fell; and tossing coins in praise, 10
 The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls,
 Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze;
 But looking at her falsely-smiling face,
 I knew her self was not in that strange place.

The poem “The Harlem Dancer” by Claude McKay describes a dancing woman and the crowd of youths that has gathered to watch her. The dancer is described almost solely in the way her body looks even though it is mentioned that she has talent other than beauty. The speaker, after much scrutiny, sees the dancer is unhappy and is distancing herself from the acts she is performing. The poem suggests the necessity for humans to look beneath what appears on the surface and to find the potential that lies hidden from the first glance.

Looking closely at the poem to see the deeper and less obvious meaning begins with the contradictory sense the title gives. The word “dancer” tends to bring forth a specific

image of an elegant, experienced woman dressed in a leotard and skirt. Dancer has a sense of class and strength associated with it as this type of person tends to be linked with ballets and long hours practicing on the tips of their toes. However, the word “dancer” has more than one connotation. In addition to the exquisite and conventional view, dancer has a negative image as well. Dancer can be used to refer to a woman who strips or performs in an erotic way for audiences as a means of employment. This type of dancer is usually preconceived as a dirty woman with little respect for herself or others. It is a cleaner way to describe a prostitute without sounding derogatory. This interpretation of the word in addition to her location, Harlem, gives the reader a dark sense before the poem is even read. Harlem is a neighborhood in New York City that is usually believed to have much crime, drug abuse, grime, and poor inhabitants. Simply looking at the title gives the audience the feeling that the subject of the poem is not worthwhile or is disreputable. Already there is a contradiction as to what is seen at first glance and what is really being said. On the surface the title appears to imply that it is going to focus on a person whom no one will be able to relate to, when at second glance it could be about a woman worthy of praise and respect performing in New York City, a place where most aspire to be to display their talents.

In the first two lines of the poem, there are more double meanings and contradictions. The speaker uses the word “applauding” as a present participle to add description to the youths in the audience. He then goes on to say that these youths “laughed with young prostitutes.” This gives a negative sense to the atmosphere of the audience. If those witnessing the performance were laughing alone, there would be a more carefree and pleasant feel. However, since they are laughing with the prostitutes the poem gains bitterness. It can now be speculated that the dancer is a prostitute as the setting is filled with youths and other prostitutes. The other prostitutes are what change the mood within the first line. The people who share this woman’s profession and are the most likely to sympathize with her are sneering and mocking her as she performs. Perhaps the reason behind this is because she is not doing a good job, but it could also lean toward the other end of the spectrum. The dancer could be wonderful and able to reach professional status causing the other prostitutes to tease her out of their own insecurities. If this is the reason

behind the actions they display while she dances, it makes the speaker's placing of the word "applauding" strategic. Applauding is used as a present participle instead of a verb because this gives possession of this positive feeling to the spectators only. By associating the onlookers with this adjective, the speaker is giving double meaning to the word "laughed." It is seen in the case of the youths as a form of appreciation and enjoyment while it is seen as a form of debasement and low self-esteem in the case of the prostitutes. Now the audience has two levels. One is seen at a perusal of the room while the other is seen only upon closer inspection. Along with this double layer of the audience, the first description of the dancer is contradicting. Her body is said to be perfect, but she is "half-clothed." Being without much of one's clothing is typically seen as scandalous and improper; it is hardly ever seen as perfect.

The next two lines (3-4) seem to confirm the suspicion of the dancer being talented resulting in a gap between her and the lower prostitutes. Her voice is said to "sound of blended flutes" that are played "upon a picnic day." Flutes are unique instruments that can be outspoken by a full band or symphony but when played in a solo form have a strong sound. These instruments sound peaceful, quiet, and beautiful. Picnics typically occur outside on a warm, sunny, and breezy day. Usually a feeling of laziness and satiation are conjured as well as the image of picnickers lying on the red and white checkered blanket after eating all the food packed in the wicker basket. This says a plethora of things about the voice and talent of the nameless dancer. She has a talent that is unique to her and to which nothing else can be paralleled. Along with the timbre and quality that is soft spoken yet reverberating when she stands alone with her voice, she has the ability to quell the needs of those watching her. This singular dancer can give the audience what they desire while calming and exciting them, a contradiction not found in most dancers or prostitutes. Yet in the praise there is a questionable distinction made about who is playing these flutes her voice resembles. The flutes sound like those "blown by black players." Why did the speaker make this distinction? It could be to subtly tell the reader that the dancer is an African-American woman. This is confirmed in line nine when the speaker states her neck is "swarthy." Swarthy means dark-skinned. Or perhaps it is to explain why she is not famous despite her

clear talent. The title places this club in Harlem where the Harlem Renaissance occurred. This renaissance gave people of color more recognition and opportunity to perform, but African-Americans were still not seen on the same level as Caucasians. If the dancer is in fact black, then she would not be praised as highly as a dancer or singer that is white. Despite her great talent, she may be getting held back because of her skin color.

As the poem continues, it becomes more pronounced that this dancer is, in fact, unfortunate. Underneath the talent and beauty, the speaker makes subtle remarks that convey the image of a trapped and damaged woman. In the sixth line, the dress of the woman is finally mentioned. Instead of a dress or traditional dance clothes, the speaker interprets her body to be covered by a “light gauze hanging loose about her form.” Gauze is a fabric that is typically used in first aid. It is wrapped around a wound to keep infection out and bodily fluids in. Protection is the main purpose of using this type of bandage that is associated with serious injuries. By comparing her clothes to gauze, the speaker could be implying that the dancer is wounded. Wrapping herself in “gauze” as a type of barrier between what she sees herself as and what she really is. She is trying to keep the infection of worthlessness and despair from entering her dreams as she dances for the audience while keeping her aspirations to be a dancer inside her. In keeping the image of herself safe from taint, she is attempting to make a distinction between what she does and what the other prostitutes do. However, the gauze is “hanging loose” around her body. While this seems to simply imply that she is stripping and wearing thinly veiled clothes, it is hinting at something more depressing for the dancer. Loose, according to the dictionary, means detached or able to be detached. It also means set free or release. The speaker is doing more than describing cloth; he is describing the mental state of the woman. The fact that the bandage separating hope from reality is loose implies that the dancer is realizing that she has no hope to get farther than a gritty club or bar. Slowly she is losing the disillusion that set her apart from her coworkers. The infection is setting in, and she is losing her hope as her dream bleeds into the air surrounding her. Perhaps the laughter of the younger prostitutes that watch her is seeping through the thin fabric of her self-esteem after her many performances.

In a like manner, lines seven and eight portray the disillusioned beauty of the dancer for what it really is: collapse. The phrase “proudly-swaying palm” at first seems to be telling of how composed and arrogant the dancer seems to be as she moves her body from left to right. The speaker even compares her to a tree which is usually thought of as a tall and strong force in nature. But just as there has been strategy involved in previous word placing, the speaker chooses the type of tree she reminds him of carefully too. A palm is a gangly tree that has the perception of snapping or falling over at the slightest pressure from the wind. During storms these trees seem to double over upon themselves, almost touching the ground depending on the heights they reach. Sometimes this bent position becomes permanent as can be seen in pictures on postcards or landscape views after a hurricane. This gives a different meaning to the word “swaying.” Instead of dancing, the speaker could be mentioning that the dancer is bending and whipping around in her struggles as a palm tree would in a storm. While she seems strong on the surface, she is actually scarred and being twisted even further into disfigurement by the phenomena occurring around her. In fact, the speaker claims to believe the dancer has “grown lovelier for passing through a storm.” Using the word “storm” as a metaphor for the hardships the dancer has faced adds to the concept of the palm tree’s appearance being destroyed by outside factors. It is unusual for an object to become more pleasing to the senses after being damaged in a storm. It could be that the woman has been given an inner strength and beauty that radiates off of her in the form of superiority and knowledge. She has made it through the difficulties because she has passed through them. The word “passing” gives the sense that she is no longer submerged in the troubles that once faced her. However, it also gives an additional sense. “Passing through a storm” gives the impression of a voluntary presence in the disaster. By using this word instead of caught or trapped to describe how the dancer was placed in the center of the storm, it feels as though the speaker is attempting to convey that the dancer put herself in this compromising position. If this is the case, then it is possible the dancer is abusing drugs or alcohol to survive her performance. The speaker could even be referencing her job itself. Her profession is not reputable, and she has the ability to climb out of the low ranks. Yet she makes no move to do so. The reasoning behind this may be an addiction that she needs

money for and cannot risk going without pay while she scavenges for better employment. Meaning the storm is not only the jeers of her companions in the club or her realizing her failing dreams, but the storm is the wasting of her person at her own hands. The dancer is slowly withering away and collapsing, and the only person who is truly noticing is the speaker as he watches her act without being involved in the audience himself.

However just as soon the speaker reveals what may be underneath the composer, he quickly takes the reader back to the surface level. Lines nine through twelve speak solely of what the dancer's body looks like and how the crowd reacts to it. The second description of the audience is much different than the first one in the beginning two lines. This time there is a darkness filled with lust and uninhibited desire enveloping the onlookers. Innocent words like "applauding" and "laughed" are replaced by tainted words like "devoured" and "eager, passionate gaze." No longer is the atmosphere fun, but it is rather demanding of the dancer. As the boys consume alcohol they lose their hold on themselves, almost as the dancer does. Carelessness consumes the reaction of the crowd now as can be seen in the way they try to express praise. "Tossing coins" at the vulnerable woman on the stage is more damaging than uplifting. Coins are heavy pieces that could leave a mark or bruise on human flesh if thrown with the right force. Dollars would be a much safer form of payment to give to the woman, but the boys no longer care about how the woman feels. She is a spectacle to them, and the audience is almost dehumanizing the dancer by treating her in this manner. This could circle back to the idea of the woman needing to abuse substances to make it through her performances. If the crowd openly harasses her and only cares about her body, she would need to distance herself from what is going on in any way possible, even if that means self harm. The sentences these lines encompass change the light tone of the poem to something much darker.

Indeed, the speaker uses the last two lines of the poem to explain that the dancer is "not in that strange place." The woman is, in fact, distancing herself from the club. She could be doing this in the form of drugs, but it could also be a method more acceptable in society. Daydreaming that she is famous and standing in front of a cheering crowd that appreciates her talent rather than just her bodily shape may be what the dancer is doing while

she performs. Escape seems to be her main goal throughout the poem. The speaker finally realizes this seemingly out of nowhere. The previous lines before this are almost like the speaker's last attempt to ignore the dancer's pain and see only what the others see. This resolve breaks as soon as the speaker inspects her face for the first time in the whole poem. "But looking at her falsely-smiling face" is the breaking point that sets the speaker apart from the audience. Eyes are said to be the windows of the soul, and they are where emotions are most readily found. The fact that it is the woman's face that speaks the truth of her condition may be related to this ancient idea. The sadness, despair, and failure would be evident in the burnt out lights in the dancer's eyes. Yet, like any depressed person would, the dancer tries to hide her afflictions. She is smiling as she performs even though she is not happy about her predicament. This gives her expression and her attitude in general a feeling of bitterness. Nobody except the speaker sees or acknowledges what she is going through, and this is something she is forced to face every day as she makes a living for herself. The speaker resigns from the ignorance to see what is easily accessible if the audience would look past the curves of her body.

Given these points, the poem is about more than a dancer that wishes to have a better life. "The Harlem Dancer" is actually a display of the damage caused by stereotypes and the necessity of looking for a deeper meaning. This is seen in the downward spiral of the dancer. As shown in lines 3-5 the woman has actual talent that could allow her to be famous; however, her talent is overshadowed by her beauty. She is stereotyped to be just a pretty face, and she is not able to get past what is witnessed on the surface to achieve what she dreams for herself. The preconceived notions surrounding her are destroying and damaging her deeply. Playing on a large stage for people that appreciate her voice instead of just her body is replaced by despair, bitterness, self-inflicted harm, and a realization that what she has is the best she is going to achieve. Even the speaker only saw what was on the surface for the majority of the poem as he commented mostly on her form rather than her voice. Personal pleasure becomes more important to the audience than the pleasure or feelings for the person giving them this pleasure. In addition to the focus of the poem demonstrating this, the poem itself functions in this way as well. The most basic example of this is the use

of words with double meanings and what lies beneath the dancer's calm exterior. On a deeper level though, the poem shows subtle hints of stepping back and disconnecting from what is typically viewed. Line eleven is the first place where a distancing occurs. The addition of "and even the girls" seems to be added as an afterthought. This phrase breaks the flow of the line. It is as though the speaker took a step back to appraise the audience and saw the girls. It took a second glance to see all that was actually there on display. Along with this, the rhyme scheme of the poem changes in the final two lines in a way that is only noticed with closer inspection. The last two lines do not include the ending word of every other line rhymes. For example, prostitutes and flutes from lines one and three, sway and day from lines two and five, and so on. The last words of lines thirteen and fourteen, face and place respectively, are the only two consecutive rhyming lines. This gives a sense of disconnect. It is done subtly so the reader does not notice during the first reading. As the dancer is removing herself from the club, the speaker is removing the reader from the normal way of thinking about the poem. "The Harlem Dancer" demonstrates the importance of searching for a deeper meaning rather than accepting whatever stereotype is first seen. This is because when removed from the conventional way of thinking it is possible to see the significance that lies hidden to the wandering eye at first glance.

Works Cited

McKay, Claude. "The Harlem Dancer." *The Vintage Book of African American Poetry: 200 Years of Vision, Struggle, Power, Beauty, and Triumph from 50 Outstanding Poets*. Ed. Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton. New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books, 2000. 100-101. Print.